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A MASTER OF PLAYWRIGHTS

BY LAFAYETTE McLAWS

To one familiar with the Harvard course in play-writing, the growth of the movement, the class methods of Professor George Pierce Baker, and the results, it seems almost like wasting good working-time to discuss whether or not the art of writing plays can be taught. The teachableness of the art of painting, of sculpture, nor of musical composition is questioned, and drama, like all these sister arts, has certain well-defined principles, certain prime essentials, which can be learned by any man or woman of average intelligence. Though what can be learned can be taught, not every student who becomes letter perfect in the technique of the art of painting becomes a great artist, nor does every class in sculpture produce a Saint-Gaudens or a Rodin, while great musical composers are few and far between. Why expect every class in play-writing to turn out a Shakespeare, a Molière, or an Augustus Thomas? Without the divine fire there can no more be a great dramatist than there can be a great artist, a great sculptor, or a great musical composer.

The first Harvard class in play-writing completed the course in June, 1908. When one remembers that "Art is hard, Art is long," 1908 doesn't seem so long ago. Yet since that time upward of thirty plays by Baker students have been produced on the professional stage. More than three-fourths of them were successful, more than one dozen "Broadway successes." It is doubtful if many teachers of the art of painting, of sculpture, or of musical composition could show a better record in teaching their art than Professor George Pierce Baker has in teaching play-writing.

When considering what has been accomplished in this course in play-writing, which in the Harvard bulletin is listed as English 47, or Technique of the Drama, two facts should be remembered. In the first place it is a limited

course, and in the second all the plays which have, so far, been sent out from it have been produced without a laboratory, or anything in the shape of a practical theater in which to try them out.

The limitation begins with picking out from a long list of applicants those whose submitted work it is thought shows the greatest dramatic promise. It is an invariable rule that an applicant must submit an original play. The dozen women submitting the best plays are selected for the Radcliffe division of the class, and the dozen men for the Harvard.

Once admitted to the course, the student finds Professor Baker's methods surprisingly simple. At the first meeting of each new class he dwells at considerable length on the impossibility of becoming a dramatist unless one be endowed with dramatic instinct. Dramatic instinct he explains as the faculty which makes a person see the life about him in an endless series of dramatic pictures, each telling its own story of comedy or tragedy. Dramatic instinct is to the playwright what an ear for music is to the composer, what an eye for color and form is to the painter. Without the faculty of dramatic instinct all knowledge of the technique of the drama, so far as writing plays is concerned, is of no avail. He makes it unmistakably plain to all new students that he has admitted them to the course because the plays they submitted had convinced him that they possessed the desirable faculty.

He is equally as emphatic when stating that the art of play-writing cannot be learned in a short time and without hard work. On the contrary, it means much hard work and long and constant study. Not of books, but of life, supplemented by close and critical observations of plays on the stage. He urges the class to go to see plays: good plays and bad plays, but go to see plays they must. Though there are no text-books for the course, he announces that he will hold the class responsible for the contents of three books on the art of writing plays—by Professor Alfred Hennequin, by William Thompson Price, and, most recent of them all, by William Archer.

These points fully understood, he strikes a note on which the class will hear him pound to the end of the course—the importance of working with the public. If any student has entered the class expecting to find Harvard's Professor of

Dramatic Literature a high-brow individual with his eyes fastened on some cold and distant star, ignoring the man in the box-office, he gets a shock. Instead he comes face to face with a man so sanely practical that one almost forgets he is teaching an art. He freely admits that he believes in publishing plays, but not until after they have been produced on the stage. The test of a play is a worthy production, the judges the public. He wants his class to write fresh, clean, well-made plays, because he is sure the public prefers that sort.

As a dramatic curtain to this first lecture he instructs the students to select and bring to the next session three short stories each. There is no limit of type or author. He wants them to select such short stories as they think they can dramatize. The result of this order is a pile of thirty-six short stories heaped on the table before his chair the next time he meets the class. In one particular class the same story was selected by four different students, but as a rule the stories are as various as the tastes of the men and women selecting them. Some are clipped from newspapers, some from magazines, others from bound volumes, and once in a great while one from the Bible.

Speaking across this pile of more or less dramatic material to the twelve women seated at the great red table about which the Radcliffe division of the class meets, Professor Baker explains about scenarios. To many of these would-be dramatists "scenario" is a new word. Others have a casual, usually a very casual, acquaintance with it. In the two classes with which I traveled through the course scenarios were unpopular. The sound of the word seemed to have a depressing effect on certain members of the class from the very first time it was mentioned. A few, very few, outgrew this aversion; with some it increased. The larger half of the dozen always believe that the writing of a scenario is a waste of valuable time, while some assert that it is impossible to make one until after the play is completed. Usually not until along in their second year will the very few agree with their teacher that a scenario is the quickest and surest way of showing up a poor plot.

After explaining just what a scenario is, how it should be made, and its value both to the play-writer and to the busy manager, Professor Baker reads several examples. At least one of these is a model, usually supplied by a graduate of

the course, and of one of his successful plays. This year the scenario of "Kismet" served as the model of good scenario-writing. The other examples are for the purpose of making plain certain specific faults which the students are to guard against.

At the third meeting of a class thirty-six short stories are returned. All have been read and one of each trio selected is marked for dramatization. More examples of scenarios are read, and further instructions given as to what should be included in and what left out of a good scenario. It is just here that a new class begins to feel less self-satisfied. By this time its members realize not only that the man at the head of the great red table is strictly business, but that he intends that they shall either come up to the mark or—The alternative is not pleasant food for thought for mature students, for 47 is a graduate course, and men or women in their early twenties are not numerous. The present Radcliffe class ranges in age from twenty-two to nearly fifty. More than half are professional writers in various fields, one is a professional actress, several have had short plays produced, and at least two are known as authors and producers of pageants. The Harvard division is almost as varied, one man having worked for a considerable period with Mr. Gordon Craig, while two others have appeared successfully on the professional stage.

The class wakes up at its fourth session, for it is then that Professor Baker begins to read the scenarios made from the chosen short stories. After each one is read he asks for criticisms. A new class acts very like an untried pack with an experienced leader. Some shoulder for place nearest the leader, and try to discover which trail of criticism he will take before expressing their opinion. Others, made bold by the knowledge that they have not only heard two lectures on scenarios, but have read all that three leading dramatic writers have to say on the subject, come eagerly forward. After these eager ones have torn this first attempt at scenario-writing to shreds and tatters, for they almost never have a word of commendation, the unwilling ones are called on by name.

When the last of the dozen has been heard from, Professor Baker comes out of his shell of silence. Very quietly he goes over the work under discussion. If there is a grain of gold in it (and he usually finds at least one), he picks it out and

explains its value. From this he turns to faults in the writing. If the student has retained the story method in developing the plot instead of the dramatic, he calls attention to it and explains the difference, with the reason why such a method, though best for the published story, is not suited for the stage. If the characterization is not distinct, he speaks of it; or if the incidents are arranged so as to produce an anti-climax, he dwells on the fact and asks the writer to think out an order which will gain a better effect. It is seldom, very seldom, that a first scenario does not have to be rewritten, some of them many times.

As soon as a scenario is up to the standard a student is told to go ahead and write the play. These first plays, dramatizations of short stories, are usually handed in just before the Christmas recess begins. Like the scenarios, most of them have to be rewritten several times before they are brought up to the standard. Next after this comes the call for scenarios for original one-act plays. To this the class usually responds promptly, for the majority of its members are eager to get to work on their own material. When these scenarios and the plays developed from them are read in class an observer notices the first definite division in the work. Usually there is one gleam, sometimes several, of what appears to be unusual dramatic talent—possibly from students whose work in dramatizing the selected short story was hardly up to the standard. Another whose dramatization has been well above the average, occasionally brilliant, may fall behind when it comes to building a plot of his own.

This short original work is either completed or well under way at the beginning of the second semester, when scenarios for full-length plays are required. Here what has appeared to be a gleam of unusual dramatic talent may disappear, sometimes without so much as a flicker, again it may become a steady beam, broadening and deepening as the work progresses. It is now easy to pick out the fortunate ones who will finish this first-year course with distinction and so be allowed to take the second year, or 47a.

This second year's work is conducted along the same general lines. From the original dozen it is seldom that more than fifty per cent. are admitted to this advanced class. To gain admission not only must a student have given unmistakable evidence of possessing the dramatic instinct, but he must have proved his industry, and his ability to build

plots, or to so improve those of other people as to make it appear worth while for him to study to become a professional dramatizer. While the first year is largely a try-out, this second year is for professional workers only. If the student's talent appears to be limited to one-act plays, he is allowed to work toward perfecting himself in the technique of short plays; if, on the other hand, he has proved his capacity for building plots for full-length plays, he is taught the many things which good dramatists may not do. At the same time Professor Baker is careful to point out instances in which many of these "may-nots" have been violated and with good results, thus proving his statement that there are no fixed, unbreakable rules in the art of play-writing.

Always during this second year, sometimes earlier, the student has come to the knowledge that the difference between the criticism of the class and the man at the head of the great red table is that the first is destructive, while that of the latter is constructive. Here, in the writer's opinion, lies the secret of the unusual success of Harvard's Professor of Dramatic Literature in teaching the art of writing plays. He not only sees the faults in the dramatic material, but the grains of gold. These he is able to separate, and so clearly give his reasons that the writer is able to discard the dross and use the good material in such a manner as to get satisfactory dramatic results.

The growth of the dramatic movement at Harvard, which, because it forged the link connecting the Theater and the University as factors in modern civilization, is now attracting world-wide attention, is as natural and simple as Professor Baker's methods of teaching. This dramatic germ began the first stage of its development more than twenty years ago, when George Pierce Baker, a Harvard undergraduate, was told by Professor Barrett Wendell to write a thesis on the pre-Shakespearian dramatists. This subject was suggested because of the publication of a book on the subject which had caused considerable discussion in college circles.

The year following Undergraduate Baker's thesis, Professor Wendell gave a half-year course on the subject. A few years after Mr. Baker's graduation Professor Wendell turned this course over to him. Yet another few years and this course, as conducted by Instructor Baker, became a

full-year course, advertised in the Harvard bulletin as English 14, the history of the English drama from its beginning to the closing of the theaters. Soon after this development students in English 14 began to ask to be allowed to hand in an original play instead of the required thesis. All such requests were sternly denied, first because the young instructor did not feel competent to judge such plays, and, second, because, English 14 being a history course, he felt bound to keep his students within that field.

As time wore on the demand for an extension of the history of the drama, bringing it down to the present day, became so insistent that Harvard established a second-year course, English 39. From the very beginning of 39, according to Professor Baker's own statement, the students begged to be allowed to write original plays instead of theses. These requests became so numerous and so persistent that it was finally decided to make a trial. A few students in the Radcliffe division were selected, and they were told to hand in original plays instead of the usual theses. This experiment proved so satisfactory that the following summer the Harvard bulletin announced for the first time English 47, or the *Technique of the Drama*.

As simple as this announcement now seems, at the time it created a sensation in college and theatrical worlds. In both circles it was asserted that play-writing could not be taught. Playwrights, like poets, were born, not made. In academic circles Professor Baker was referred to as a "sensationalist," and disapproval was freely expressed of the innovation at Harvard. Theatrical folk, actors, managers, and play-writers all ridiculed the idea, made merry jests about "that high-brow professor at Harvard who is trying to teach college boys and girls how to write plays."

This had been going on for something more than a year when the interest of the general public was aroused by Mrs. Minnie Madden Fiske's appearance in "*Salvation Nell*." This was an instance in which the public and the critics agreed about the merits of a play. The critics gave it good reviews and the public flocked to see it. When it became known that the author, Edward Sheldon, was a young man, less than twenty-five, and a graduate of Professor Baker's first Harvard class in English 47, 1908, the theatrical and academic worlds as well as the general public began to take notice.

Mr. John Craig came forward with an offer of a prize of five hundred dollars in cash and a week's professional production at the Castle Square Theater, Boston, for the best play produced by Baker students. In New York the late Mr. Henry B. Harris offered to be one of five to give ten thousand dollars each to endow a chair of dramatic composition in an American university. The academic world was sufficiently aroused for four Western colleges to offer courses in the history and the technique of the drama.

The next season this interest was increased by Mr. Sheldon's "The Boss" and "The Nigger," both Broadway successes. Then it became known that "The Faun," being produced at the same time down at Daly's Theater, by Mr. William Faversham, was by Mr. Edward Knobloch, who had taken the two courses in the history of the drama under Harvard's Professor in Dramatic Literature. "The Scarecrow" and "Mater" were both being produced at theaters farther up-town, and it became known that Mr. Percy MacKaye also was a Baker student. And Josephine Preston Peabody, whose "The Piper" was having a good run at the New Theater after winning the Shakespeare prize in England, acknowledged herself as a Baker student in the Radcliffe division of English 14 and 39.

That same season, over in Boston, the John Craig Harvard-Radcliffe Prize was awarded to Miss Florence Lincoln for "The End of the Bridge." This play, instead of running one week at the Castle Square Theater, created so much interest that Mr. Craig was forced to cancel several contracts and continue it for nine full weeks, two performances each day. It broke the record at the Castle Square Theater for long and profitable runs. According to Mr. Craig's statement he not only got the prize-money back, but had a profitable production for himself and company, with a snug sum in royalty for the author.

Up to the present time the John Craig Harvard-Radcliffe Prize has been awarded three times. Though the second prize-winner ran only five weeks, it earned a fair profit for both the producer and the author. The third winning play was "Believe Me, Xantippe!" which ran a month longer at the Castle Square Theater than "The End of the Bridge"; it was then taken to New York, where it not only had a successful run, but introduced a new comedy star, Miss Mary Young, to Broadway.

Since that season when the general public discovered Professor Baker by way of Mr. Sheldon's "Salvation Nell," other Harvard playwrights have come to the front with successful plays. Mr. Jules Erkert Goodman's first notable success was "Mother," Mr. Allan Davis scored a hit with "The Iron Door" and "A House Divided." Mr. Sheldon has added "Princess Zimzim," "The High Road," and "Romance"; Mr. Percy MacKaye "A Thousand Years Ago"; and Mr. Knobloch "Kismet" and a half-interest in "Milestones." Besides these there have been several long plays that have enjoyed good runs on the road and in the smaller cities, with more than a half-score of one-act plays that have been notably successful in vaudeville houses. Several of these little plays have been prize-winners.

With such results obtained without a laboratory, a trial theater of any sort, with nothing to guide the students but the judgment of one man, and he a college professor, not a theatrical manager or critic, it is not to be wondered at that the college and theatrical worlds are beginning to weaken in their conviction that play-writing cannot be taught. To-day there are a score of colleges, great and small, in this country advertising courses on the history and technique of the drama. At two of these institutions theaters to try out the plays written by students are now being equipped. Producing managers, great and small, though not entirely cured of their prejudice against the college-trained playwrights, are willing to give their work a careful reading. Some of them, notably Mr. David Belasco, have announced through the press not only that play-writing can be taught, but, like the arts, painting, sculpture, and musical composition, it can only be mastered by hard and constant study.

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